

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS IN A DIGITAL WORLD: A COMMENTARY ON THE NETFLIX LIMITED-SERIES ‘ADOLESCENCE’

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Abstract

Netflix’s four-part limited series ‘Adolescence’, released in early 2025, is a critically acclaimed representation of lives of adolescents in today’s digital world, sometimes even leading to nasty situations and producing children in conflict with law. This commentary revisits the award-winning show to understand its portrayal of the intersection of child in conflict with law, social environment dictating the lives of adolescents, mental health, familial bonds and parenting as well as the juvenile justice system. This article analyses the show and argues that it contests conventional narratives, and instead draws attention towards parenting failure due to lack of knowledge, rapid inculcation of ‘manosphere’ amongst digitally-influenced adolescents and the limits of protective systems.

Keywords: adolescence, child in conflict with law; juvenile justice; digital world; social media, manosphere

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Introduction

In March 2025, a four-part limited series on Netflix broke the internet. In the first four days of its release, it garnered 24.3 million views worldwide becoming the most top-watched series in more than 70 countries (India Today Entertainment Desk, 2025). At the 2026 Golden Globe Awards, the series took home four awards including the youngest actor to ever win a Golden Globe. Written and created by Stephen Graham and Jack Thorne, and directed by Philip Barantini, 'Adolescence' created waves soon after it was released on Netflix. The series is not only technically praiseworthy for its impeccable direction and single-take episodes without any edits, but also has a compelling story-telling which forces the viewer to ponder upon 'childhood and adolescence' in today's times.

Set in a small town in South Yorkshire of England, Adolescence is the story of a 13-year-old boy, Jamie Miller, who is charged with and arrested for the murder of a girl from his school. The series begins with armed police officials barging into Jamie's house and arresting him on count of murder. From thereon, the series unfolds the socio-legal institutional interweaving of the system with juvenile justice. The Guardian accurately reported it to be 'the drama that will horrify all parents' (Heritage, 2025) because it sets up a rendezvous of the parents with a side of their children that they didn't know existed. The daunting part about the story is its resonance with the real world. Adolescence is an exceptional narration of the culture of digital world and how children today are consumed by it and live their lives figuratively inside it. It also portrays how the legal systems, schools, peers, families and the digital environment intersect to shape their lives. When Jamie's peers in the show nonchalantly refer to terminologies such as 'blue pills', 'red pills', 'incel', etc., it makes not only the adult characters in the show but also the viewer sitting back home, to take a pause and learn about these terms and how they control the lives of children these days.

Socially-Induced Adolescent Vulnerability

One of the crucial aspects of the show is its affirmation of the idea that an adolescent is not just the product of who they are as an individual but primarily of the social influences around them. Jamie is seen to be a regular boy from the outside, but is caught in the web of what is referred to as 'manosphere'. Manosphere is referred to online communities in the digital world which target male audience to spread the idea of 'an ideal man', often packaged with misogyny, toxic masculinity, normalizing violence against women, hate speech, etc. (UN

Women, 2025). More often than not, neither parents nor officials at school are able to detect or notice any signals of such behaviour. Hence, it is almost like two different worlds that the child lives in, each being disassociated from the other. In the show, Jamie is seen to be deeply affected by the non-reciprocation of his 'romantic feelings' and subsequent 'bullying' by Katie Leonard on Instagram, leading him to eventually stab her to death. The investigating officer discovers that Katie had replied 'incel' to one of Jamie's comments on Instagram, which could possibly be one of the triggers. Cyberbullying among adolescents is of increasing concern with research typically reporting around 13 to 70% of youth have experienced cyberbullying, with prevalence rates peaking in grades seven to ten (Jackson, Bussey, & Trompeter, 2020). Studies report that children who are victimised tend to experience an erosion of self-confidence and self-esteem, more so than their un-victimised peers (Smorti et al., 2005).

The show exhibits the greater concern of impact of digital world and its ability to influence adolescents in ways which adults often may not understand or comprehend. It brings to the forefront the subculture of manosphere and how deeply it permeates into the lives of young boys. The series forces adult viewers, especially parents of young adults, to face the reality of online risk environments that their kids are subjected to leading to shaping their thoughts, ideals, and behaviour.

The writers deliberately show Jamie to belong to a normal family with no issues or troubles at home, so that there is no emotional justification for his act. Many teenage and adolescent dramas show the child growing in a dysfunctional family, or having abusive parents, or alcoholic or absent parents, and therefore they turn out to be who they are. However, *Adolescent* completely negates this narrative by in fact showing that Jamie's parents are loving and caring. Yet the nuance lies in their failure to simply understand the inner world of Jamie. It is not neglect of the parents but rather a lack of knowledge about the vulnerability of their child in the parallel digital world. Thus, the narrative of the show problematizes the broader socio-cultural impact on a child outside the familial bonds, rather than villainizing the parents.

Series' Engagement With Child in Conflict With Law

The idea of juvenile justice and child welfare mechanisms is based on the presumption that a child in conflict with law is on a revertible trajectory. They can recover from the digression and seamlessly reintegrate back into

mainstream society. However, Adolescence challenges this notion and sparks a conversation about viability of rehabilitation in some situations. The show also demonstrates the effect of surveillance at various levels – family, institution and digital realm. Digital presence, online behaviour and documentation of one's lives creates more permanence, which may act as a hinderance for rehabilitation and defeat the concept of a 'fresh start'.

Adolescence also dedicatedly engages with the aspect of mental health and psychological assessment of Jamie. It does so without over-simplifying the conversation and interaction between Jamie and the forensic psychologist, Briony Ariston. It rather portrays how pervasive the impact of digital space is on Jamie, that during many parts of his conversation with the psychologist, she is left distressed. The third episode of the series, which is perhaps one of the most impactful and brilliantly delivered episodes, shows counselling sessions between Jamie and Briony seven months after his arrest. During the sessions, Jamie is seen to have little remorse over his act, and rather reveals his notions about masculinity, the fact that he wanted to take advantage of Katie while she was in an emotionally vulnerable state, his confession to wanting to grope her during his confrontation meeting about her comments on Instagram, and eventually ending up taking her life with the knife which he originally intended to use only to threaten her. At one point Jamie is also seen asking Briony whether she likes him, indicating the constant urge to get attention from and be liked by the opposite gender. These revelations and conversations, leave not only Briony disturbed and perturbed, but also makes the viewer question about the evolution and state of mind of an adolescent in today's times. It implies that their lives are so heavily controlled and gripped by what is happening to them on social media, that they are detached from the impact of their actions in the real world. Counselling and psychological intervention are integrated into the storyline but is not presented as the ultimate solution. On the contrary it is shown to have its own limitations, and inability to deal with the complexities of an adolescent mind. The determinants of stress, confusion, aggression and deficiency in understanding the consequences of action despite the intervention, show the deep-rooted structural impact. In the end, Jamie is seen waiting for trial, where he decides to plead guilty.

Conclusion

Adolescence, apart from the cinematic sensation that it got accolades for, also raised some very pertinent questions about parenting and familial bonds in

current times. It draws attention to conversations about online stigmatization, radicalization, perception-building about opposite gender through social media narratives, youth aggression and violence, social isolation, perpetuating toxic masculinity, and so much more. The show to an extent also proves, Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratifications Theory, which states that individuals often turn to media to gratify their needs, whether cognitive, effective, personal integrative or social integrative (Sichach, 2023). It is a wake-up call not only for parents but also stakeholders, including institutions, educators, law and policy makers, to confront issues which affect children as well as their families, and introduce necessary interventions. In the last episode of the series, it is shown how even a year after Jamie's arrest the family was struggling with social ostracization, vandalism and simply trying to get back to normalcy.

The show is also an illustration of the difference in approach from what we see in the Indian system. The Indian system is protective in nature of a child in conflict in law and has certain mechanisms in place to ensure the same; for example - mandatory bail under Section 12 of Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 irrespective of the nature of offence. In the series, Jamie is held in detention for almost a year since the date of arrest, awaiting trial. Child in conflict with law is to be kept in observation homes or safe houses and not in police lock-ups or jails. Jamie is seen to be apprehended from his home by heavily armed police personnel and thereafter being kept in detention in a lock-up.

Adolescence, as a show, certainly holds a distinct place in pop culture not only for its take on one distressing event but also for addressing the nuanced issues leading up to that one event and beyond it. One line from the show—*"It's crazy what your brain tells you to do when you are a kid"* sums up the essence of dealing with children in conflict with law and those in need of care and protection. With digital space all-encompassing their lives, vulnerability can now stem from invisible environments, making it even more difficult to shadow them to offer protection. The show marks a significant contribution in going beyond over-simplification of issues related to children in conflict with law and initiates a discourse on rights of children and role and responsibilities of adults in the digital age, thereby being a testament to the fact that pop culture continues to be a strong medium of displaying and deliberating upon complex socio-legal critique.

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